DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 122 507 EC 082 885

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TITLE The Emotionally-Handicapped Child: Altering Home, School, and Social Environments as the Key to Prevention and Cure.
PUB DATE Apr 76
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual International Convention, The Council for Exceptional Children (54th, Chicago, Illinois, April 4-9, 1976)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Behavior Problems; Elementary Secondary Education; *Emotionally Disturbed; *Etiology; Exceptional Child Education; *Family Problems; Prevention; *School Role; *Social Influences

ABSTRACT

The author examines the causes of behavioral disorders that stem from conditions existing in the home, school, and society, and offers specific recommendations for institutional changes which would reduce the number of behaviorally disordered children. Factors noted to be significantly related to emotional difficulties include divorce; the school's emphasis on external motivation such as grades, competition, and fear of punishment; and society's support of conformity and distinct male/female roles. Among author's suggestions are the creation of an adequate number of inexpensive educational and counseling facilities for parents and improved training for teachers and administrators in techniques for effectively facilitating both cognitive and emotional growth in students. The creation of healthier environments in major child rearing institutions is stressed. (Author/SB)

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THE EMOTIONALLY-HANDICAPPED CHILD: ALTERING HOME, SCHOOL, AND SOCIAL ENVIRONMENTS AS THE KEY TO PREVENTION AND CURE

By Vern Jones

Terms such as emotionally handicapped, emotionally disturbed, and behavior disordered are being heard with increasing frequency in our schools. These labels have been used to describe children with such diverse problems as autism, extreme acting out, mild acting out, underachievement, and passivity. As community and legislative pressures have begun urging school districts to provide "educationally appropriate" services for these children, school personnel have been faced with three important questions: 1) What percentage of the school population is experiencing emotional problems to the point that it is significantly handicapping their ability to function productively in school? 2) What are the primary causes of these problems? 3) What techniques are available to provide assistance for these children?

The first question is difficult to answer. Due to the variation in definitions of productive school behavior, estimates range from 5 to 20 percent of the school population. Based on current research and my work with schools, residential treatment programs, youth diversionary agencies, physicians, and juvenile court personnel, I would suggest that a figure of 5 - 10 would be a conservative estimate.

The question of causation has tended to focus on the concept variously termed minimal brain dysfunction, hyperkinesia, or hyperactivity. All of these terms suggest that the cause is primarily a form of neurological dysfunction which may disappear with

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age, but which can be partially or entirely alleviated in the short run with some form of drug therapy. More recently, an emphasis has been placed on the possible dietary causes of minimal brain dysfunction. Finally, as Sydney Walker III highlighted in the December 1974 edition of Psychology Today, there are numerous more subtle and complex physiological causes for inappropriate and unproductive student behavior.

These causative factors are important and certainly warrant an increased research focus. However, even when thorough diagnostic techniques and extensive research findings are available, it is unlikely that these factors will prove to be the primary cause in over 10 percent of children diagnosed as emotionally handicapped. What then is the cause of this increasingly large number of disturbed children? As I view the problem, the primary causes stem from three general environmental/cultural areas: 1) home, 2) school, 3) society.

Over the years I have become increasingly impressed by the position of the home environment as the key to the development of sound mental health for children. There are children with serious emotional problems who live in stable home environments where parents have a solid understanding of child development, employ healthy discipline techniques, and model patterns of warm, open, interpersonal communication. This is, however, the exception rather than the rule, and these children are frequently those who have rather serious physiological disabilities.

Unfortunately, there are several increasingly prevalent characteristics of American homes which appear to be significantly

related to emotional difficulties in children in children. First, nearly one million children are involved in divorce every year, and over one fourth of all children in the United States are being reared in single parent homes. Therefore, an increasing number of children are being reared in homes characterized by psychological instability and a situation where the parent or parents have considerably less time and psychological energy for their children. Second, the increased financial pressures caused both by inflation and by parents' self-imposed desire for ever-increasing levels of financial earning power have created a situation where large amounts of parental time and energy are diverted from child rearing. Third, in a society characterized by rapid technological growth, social awareness, and social change, there is an expanding gap between the values and skills of the parents and those which will be most productive for their children. This creates a situation in which parents not only feel estranged from and often confused by their children, but also must expend considerable time and energy dealing with their own estrangement from and confusion with society. Fourth, due to the rapid decline of the extended family (less than 5% of the homes in the United States include an adult other than the parents) and the decrease in family size, many of today's parents have neither the experience in dealing with children nor the support of older adults to aid in child-rearing. In summary, the breakdown of the extended family and the associated sense of anomia created by urbanization, along with the frequent instability of the nuclear family leaves the child with fewer significant adults to serve as models or to provide stability, guidance, and caring.

While less influential than the home environment, the schools have become the second major socializing force in our society. Consequently, schools now play a significant role in the creation or prevention of emotional difficulties. While volumes have been written in the past five years on the failure of the American school system to provide emotionally and intellectually growth-producing experiences for our young people, the schools' failures can be divided into three major areas. Furthermore, these failures are directly related to the large number of emotionally handicapped children in our schools. First, the schools have consistently over-emphasized the need for and use of external motivation; i.e., grades, competition, fear of punishment, and more recently, behavior modification and contingency management programs. This ideological stance ignores significant amounts of research. For example, we know that there is a direct relationship between amount of anxiety and learning. Yet many children find the schools, with their emphasis on one-way communication, competition, and extrinsic motivation, a frightening place to be. We also know that individual children vary greatly in the style of instruction and motivational strategy under which they learn best, and that individuals learn most effectively when the material being dealt with creates an optimum level of disequilibrium or incongruity for the learner. Despite the rather wide dissemination and acceptance of this knowledge, I all too often enter classrooms where thirty students are working on the same assignment and being evaluated on the same criteria. In addition

to the effect on learning, this emphasis on extrinsic motivation and uniform structures also reinforces a dependency on external forces and consequently stifles the development of personal responsibility with the associated feeling of personal competence and an internal focus of evaluation and control. When the instructional style is appropriate for the individual, the learning environment is safe, and the incongruity is with the individual's range, learning appears to be an exciting, self-reinforcing event for children. Unfortunately, these conditions in isolation or combination all too seldom characterize school classrooms.

The schools' second major mistake has been their emphasis on products rather than processes, and their corresponding ineffectiveness in developing skills in the affective domain. Students have learned facts and procedures rather than skills in the process of problem solving, or an understanding of the basic concepts and principles underlying an academic discipline. More importantly, within the context of a society which is increasingly complex, crowded, and confusing, the curriculum has continued to shy away from the areas of personal growth and an honest and realistic confrontation of critical issues.

Finally, the schools have failed to provide an environment in which students are exposed to a variety of healthy adult models. Schools have reinforced the role of the teacher as a disseminator of information and a manager of children. Meanwhile, teacher training institutions have failed to help teachers develop skills in interpersonal relations, self-awareness, values clarification, or problem solving. Without these personal skills, teachers cannot be expected to serve as healthy models for their

students. Furthermore, without these skills, developed in coordination with specific strategies for teaching them to others, we cannot expect teachers to facilitate the development of responsibility and mental health in their students.

Like the home and school environment, the values and priorities implicitly or explicitly espoused or accepted in a society have significant implications for the personality development of its children. Unfortunately, many of the values currently permeating our society either cause or reinforce the unproductive behaviors of the children we describe as emotionally handicapped. These values include the emphasis placed on, and the acceptance of: competition, conformity (with a veneer of individualism), distinct male/female roles, bigness, pleasure as bad, perfection, pressure, violence, loneliness, possessiveness, and a lack of honesty and openness. As long as we continue to support these values in an environment which increasingly points to their destructive tendencies, we will of necessity create angry, confused, and even self destructive young people.

Having viewed a number of the environmental causes linked to the increasing frequency and depth of emotional difficulties in today's children, the logical and necessary question is: What can we do to reverse this trend? In examining the possible cures, we must again focus on the home, school, and community.

Solutions to the problems created in the home must be examined within the context of social reality; i.e., it is unlikely that we can de-urbanize our society or that we will soon see a revitalization of the extended family. However, there are both

short and long range solutions which appear feasible. Any short range plans must emphasize the creation of an adequate number of inexpensive educational and counseling facilities for parents interested in improving skills in child-rearing, developing better communication skills, or receiving assistance in dealing with personal and/or family problems. In addition, we must provide increasing numbers of inexpensive, well-staffed, community day care centers for children of working as well as non-working mothers. Data from the Soviet Union and Israel indicate the positive effects of young children receiving significant amounts of caring and learning opportunities outside of the home. Community centers could provide such experiences for children as well as coordinating counseling and training facilities for parents.

While implementation of these short term solutions should make a noticeable difference in the number of children experiencing emotional difficulties, they must be integrated into an intensive, well-planned, long range program. The key components in such a program would include sound, experiential training programs in parenting, interpersonal communication, self-awareness, and problem solving. Surprising as it may seem, these components are currently found in the espoused though seldom implemented educational goals of many public schools. These goals include the development of a curriculum based on certain "survival skills" to which every school age child would be exposed. While these programs frequently require course work and demonstrated competencies in such areas as personal finance, health and hygiene, community government,

consumer science, career education, etc. it is only a short step to the development of experiences and required competencies in areas such as child development, family living, personal problem solving, and interpersonal communication. We cannot expect future parents to rear mentally healthy children unless they have developed sound mental health, have a demonstrated knowledge of sound child rearing techniques, and have learned to make well thought out decisions regarding marriage and childbearing.

Excellent programs which could serve as models have already been established in all of the critical areas. For example, the Parkrose School District in Portland, Oregon, has developed a class in Family Living. Students in this class take part in a mock marriage; and the couples are involved in such activities as developing a family budget, buying a home, deciding on whether to have children, discussing discipline, etc. Even more significant is the fact that numerous school districts have developed programs in which students not only study child development and child rearing, but also work directly with children as volunteers in a day care center. Only through this actual experience can students learn about their reactions to children, and thereby obtain vital information regarding their feelings about having and rearing children. Finally, many school districts offer courses in interpersonal communication and values clarification - necessary tools for the development of the sound mental health needed for parents who will raise their children in an increasingly complex society.

While the present school curriculum contains the potential for playing a significant role in creating healthier home environments, the schools themselves must receive a sizeable overhaul if

they are to alleviate rather than contribute to the creation of emotional problems. The recent trend toward the creation of school-based programs for emotionally handicapped children has one major drawback. The format for such programs has often employed either a self-contained classroom or the creation of a team of specialists whose task is to create an appropriate academic program and/or alter the child's behavior through the use of behavior modification techniques. Both of these approaches presuppose that the problem lies primarily with the child, rather than with the environment. While it is true that a small percentage of children require specialized learning environments and behavior management techniques, a rather large percentage of "emotionally handicapped" children are reasonably healthy children responding in an understandable manner to a rather inappropriate environment.

While I disagree with the need for de-schooling society, the schools must be altered to create healthier, more productive learning environments. In order for this to occur, several changes must be made. First, teachers and administrators must receive improved training in techniques for effectively facilitating both cognitive and emotional growth in their students. This means that teacher training institutions must significantly improve their programs in the areas of curriculum, teaching strategies, and in the development of personal awareness and communication skills for prospective teachers. Secondly, schools from elementary through high school need additional counselors to help teachers with this task and to work with students who require

individual attention. Third, it is well documented that a large number of children with emotional difficulties also experience learning difficulties. Class sizes must be reduced so that teachers can more effectively individualize academic instruction and include the child in planning and evaluating his academic program. In a class of 30 children even the most skilled teacher will have difficulty developing a learning environment which is sensitive to each individual child. Smaller classes would also allow teachers an opportunity to develop a more positive working relationship with parents and the community. Finally, schools must become places where teachers serve as much needed adult models. This can occur only when school personnel break out of their traditional role of disseminators of information and become warm, open facilitators of growth in both the cognitive and affective domains. Teachers must relate openly and productively to both their colleagues and their students and must share with students their skills in decision making and communication as well as subject matter.

Although a nation's priorities, values, and the mental health of its citizens is more than the sum of its institutions, we can change these values only by facilitating growth in the vital institutions. If we can do this, perhaps we can create a generation less distraught with emotional difficulties.

In summary, the task of aiding children currently handicapped by their emotional difficulties and of reducing the number of children who develop such difficulties will not be accomplished by concentrating on several techniques for "curing" a few of these

children. Rather, we must create healthier environments in our major child-rearing institutions. These changes will serve both a curative and preventative function. In addition, they will provide the necessary base for the implementation of successful treatment programs for the small percentage of children whose emotional difficulties are partially or exclusively caused by physical factors.

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